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Digital Methods for Ethnography: Analytical concepts for ethnographers exploring social media environments

Abstract

The aim of this article is to introduce some analytical concepts suitable for ethnographers dealing with social media environments. Due to the growth of social media, The Internet structure has become a very complex, fluid and fragmented space. Within this space, it is not always possible to consider the ‘classical’ online community as the privileged field site for the ethnographer, in which s/he immerses him/herself. Differently, taking inspiration from some methodological principles of the Digital Methods paradigm, I suggest that the main task for the ethnographer moving across social media environments should not be exclusively that of identifying an online community to delve into but of mapping the practices through which Internet users and digital devices structure social formations around a focal object (e.g., a brand). In order to support the ethnographer in the mapping of social formations within social media environments, I propose five analytical concepts: *community*, *public*, *crowd*, *self-presentation as a tool*, and *user as a device*.

Keywords: Multi-Sited Ethnography, Virtual Ethnography, Digital Methods, Community, Public, Crowd, Social Media.

Introduction

The term *social media* commonly refers to “online means of communication, conveyance, collaboration, and cultivation among interconnected and interdependent networks of people, communities, and organizations enhanced by technological capabilities and mobility” (Tuten and Solomon 2016: 4). In crossing the threshold of social media, users transform themselves into *prosumers* (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010), insofar as they can actually interact with online content, by producing, commenting, reusing, remixing, and sharing them in a *many-to-many* kind of logic. Thus, we can consider blogs, forums as well as social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+, and LinkedIn as social media platforms. Social media represent the backbone of the so-called Web 2.0, a term which refers to “developments in online technology that enable interactive capabilities in an environment characterized by user control, freedom, and dialogue” (O’Reilly 2005). Web 2.0 differs from its previous version, Web 1.0, which was mainly based on the *one-to-many* logic of communication and did not permit users to interact directly with contents online.

With the widespread diffusion of social media, the Internet has become more and more incorporated into the everyday practices of people as well as into those of social researchers (Garcia et al. 2009). This is particularly true for ethnographers, for whom – as recently stated by Ronald Hallett and Kristen Barber – “it is no longer imaginable to conduct ethnography without considering online spaces” (2014: 307). Therefore, it is not by chance that in the last few years various styles of online ethnography have been developed, each identified by a different label: *virtual ethnography* (Hine 2000), *Internet ethnography* (Miller and Slater 2001), *cyber-ethnography* (Escobar 1994), *digital ethnography* (Murthy 2008), *expanded ethnography* (Beneito-Montagut 2011), *ethnography of the virtual worlds* (Boellstorff et al. 2012), to name but a few.

All these online ethnographic approaches convincingly demonstrate how ethnography is a flexible method that on the one hand can be effectively adapted to online environments, but on the

other hand continuously needs to be reshaped according to the features and mutations of online environments (Pink et al. 2016; Robbins and Schulz 2009). With this paper, I contribute to this methodological strand by proposing five analytical concepts, i.e., *community*, *public*, *crowd*, *self-presentation as a tool*, and *user as a device*. I deem these concepts useful for mapping the structure of social media environments and contextualizing the production of content, practices, and discourses developing around them. In discussing and elaborating these concepts, I will mainly draw on the Digital Methods paradigm (Rogers 2013). Digital Methods invite researchers to *follow the medium*, i.e., consider the Internet not so much as an *object* of study, rather as a *source* of new methods and languages for understanding contemporary society. Thus, I believe that Digital Methods can effectively inspire and support ethnographic practice, especially for exploring the complex landscape of contemporary Web 2.0, mainly populated by social media platforms, which is a much more fluid and dispersed socio-cultural context than virtual communities (Rheingold 1994) populating the 1.0 Web and usually addressed as the main field of research by online ethnographers (Postill and Pink 2012). In proposing a combination of ethnographic practice with Digital Methods, I do not intend to introduce a ‘fresh’ style of online ethnography or establish a ‘new’ methodological apparatus for studying online environments ethnographically. In fact, my main purpose is to propose some analytical concepts, which could be useful for ethnographers who (in a given moment of his/her fieldwork) need entering social media environments. (This could happen in the preliminary phases of his/her fieldwork, for mapping the socio-cultural context in which participants are situated (Hine 2015), as well as in the most advance phases, when s/he has to follow the participants’ everyday practices, (Dirksen et al. 2010), which more and more frequently are taking place online). Actually, in developing these concepts, I followed the exhortation of Christine Hine to elaborate methodological strategies for developing ethnography *for* the Internet, rather than an ethnography *of* the Internet (Hine 2015).

The ethnographic response to the challenges of studying society in the age of digital communication

As argued by Garcia et al. (2009), especially with the growth of social media, “technologically mediated communication is being incorporated into ever more aspects of everyday life. The distinction between online and offline worlds is therefore becoming less useful as activities in these realms become increasingly merged in our society and the two spaces interact with and transform each other” (2009: 53). Therefore, it seems it is not only particularly interesting, but also concretely viable to study the everyday practices of social actors and the cultural forms naturally emerging from them, in and throughout the Internet.

The ethnographic discipline addressed this challenge – long before the advent of social media (Correll 1995; Kendall 1996; Slater 1998) – by developing a set of diverse strategies of adaptation of the classical ethnographic method within online spaces (Robinson and Schulz 2009). In doing so, ethnography scholars undertook a refined process of ‘translation’ of the classical categories of anthropology (e.g., community, field, participant, ethics etc.) as well as of the traditional qualitative techniques of analysis (e.g., interviews, participant observation, etc.), within the online domain (Baym 1995; Markham 1998).

The necessity to adapt classical ethnographic concepts and techniques to the online domain is also linked to two different modes through which ethnography generally deals with online environments. The first draws on the idea that the online world, similarly to the offline one, is populated by communities, which are not mere virtual entities, but instead real and complex social formations that have a concrete influence on the life of their participants (Jones 1995; Kavanaugh and Patterson 2001; Komito 1998). Therefore, within this paradigm, the main task of the ethnographer is to detect and delve into these online communities, observing and participating in the social practices of their participants in order to understand their shared culture. The second draws on the paradigm of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), which exhorts the ethnographer

to follow participants throughout their movements across space. In our contemporary *network society* (Castells 1996), this also entails following participants across online platforms, since they are used to spending a significant part of their everyday life within them.

Virtual Ethnography

A significant example of the methodological endeavor towards the adaptation of traditional ethnographic techniques and concepts within the digital domain is represented by *virtual ethnography* as featured by Christine Hine (2000), who gave a crucial contribution to the development and systematization of ethnography as a method to bridge offline and online realms. The principal aim of virtual ethnography is to understand whether and to what extent *the virtual*, i.e., the complex network of public discourses and digital platforms comprising the Internet, is experienced “as radically different and separate from ‘the real’” (Hine 2000: 8). Hine convincingly demonstrates how the Internet, far from being experienced as a cyberspace apart from everyday experience, is strictly intertwined with the everyday life of participants, as it is a technology constantly used for empowering their actual identities as well as their social bonds and activities (Woolgar 2002).

Hine grounds her ethnographic approach for exploring the Internet in two theoretical views: the Internet as *culture* and the Internet as a *cultural artefact*. The former conceives the Internet as a *space* in which social actors produce and reproduce culture, related to both the Internet itself and their topics of interest – (consider for example fandoms, Jenkins 2006). The main field of research for observing the Internet as a culture is represented by online communities (mainly located on Internet Relay Chats (IRCs), or newsgroups) (Wellman and Gulia 1997). The latter conceives the Internet as an *object* that is shaped by discourses, goals and practical uses of social actors. The main field of research for observing the Internet as an artefact is the offline world, i.e., the everyday settings in which social actors situate and deploy the aforementioned discourses, goals, and

practices. From this theoretical framework is derived the methodological principle according to which online reality can be studied as being offline and *vice versa*. Actually, several virtual ethnographic inquiries imply the observation of the same community, both in their offline and online setting, as well as the submission of face-to-face interviews to online communities' members in order to understand the meanings and scopes they assign to them (Gatson and Zweerink 2004; Muñiz and Schau 2005).

In establishing this framework, virtual ethnography places in the foreground the methodological necessity to adapt the traditional ethnographic techniques to the digital domain, therefore somewhat *virtualizing* them (virtual surveys, interviews via chat, interviews by email, etc.), skilfully mixing digital techniques with analogical techniques (for example, participant observation online and offline).

Multi-sited ethnography

Multi-sited ethnography is a fully fledged ethnography of contemporaneity, dealing with global fluxes of mobility and communication, which George Marcus defines as “a mode of ethnographic research self-consciously embedded in the world system, [...], moves out from the single sites and local situation of conventional ethnographic research design to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (1995: 96). Therefore, for an ethnographer living in contemporary digital society (Lupton 2015), to *follow things* from site to site is necessary to confront online environments, which tend to be ubiquitous and places where social actors spend a significant part of their everyday lives (Beneito-Montagut 2011; Hine 2007).

There exist several examples of multi-sited ethnography developed on the Internet. Let us consider the empirical research of Molz (2006), in which she tracked the movements of round-the-world-travellers across websites and physical places, or Hine's study of website developers in which she followed both their online and offline practices (Hine 2000). In this sense, virtual

ethnography can be deemed as a natural extension of multi-sited ethnography. As in virtual ethnography, the continuous shift between the offline and online world that characterizes multi-sited ethnography, places in the foreground the methodological necessity to adapt traditional ethnographic techniques to the digital environments. In the same way, there also occurs a translation of traditional ethnographic concepts to the digital domain, such as *participant* or *community*. In particular, online communities are considered to be the main online social formations which participants move across and where the ‘multi-sited ethnographer’ has to follow them (Baym 2000).

Following Marcus’ (1995) exhortation to *follow the thing*, Hine recently proposed a new approach to online multi-sited ethnography – which she calls *mobile ethnography* (Hine 2011). Starting from the case study of the *Antiques Roadshow* TV show, Hine suggests that it could be very interesting for the ethnographer to follow the circulation of a given object, e.g., a brand or a TV program, across different online platforms, in order to observe and compare the different meanings that different online audiences attach to it. Hine does not deem this approach to be proper ethnography, rather an ethnographic technique, “yet compatible with an ethnographic urge to understand the object of inquiry from multiple perspectives” (2015: 15) and strategic for opening up new paths of in-depth investigation both online and offline as well as for stimulating the ethnographer’s imagination. Introducing *mobile ethnography*, Hine also puts forward an interesting methodological intuition, suggesting taking advantage of the Internet’s *native techniques* (Rogers 2009; Thelwall 2005), i.e., the “variety of ready-to-hand tools such as the Internet search engine to locate relevant connections and explore some of the meaning-making practices that unfold in diverse settings” (Hine 2011: 8). In particular, Hine insists on the importance of triangulating the outputs of some online digital devices (such as the TouchGraph SEO Browser) with the insights emerging from traditional qualitative techniques (e.g., face-to-face interviews and/or virtual interviews via mailing lists) in order to identify which key participants to contact as well as topics to investigate (Hine 2015).

Here I would like to expand Hine's intuitions and suggestions by undertaking an epistemological reflection on the *natively digital methods* embedded in the aforementioned online devices, as well as the ways in which the researcher can take advantage of such methods for tracing and understanding socio-cultural processes. Furthermore, embracing Hine's exhortation to following an object across different online platforms, I would like to empirically reflect on the different social formations that the different affordances of social media and users co-create around the same focal object.

Form adaptation to reconfiguration of methods

The transformation of the Internet, triggered by the broad diffusion of social media, poses two challenges to ethnography: theoretical and methodological. On a theoretical level, the ethnographer has to deal with the fact that social media tend to structure online interactions across very fluid, ephemeral and dispersed social forms – a condition that pushes towards radically rethinking the classical ethnographic categories such as field, community, identity, participant, ethics, etc. (Postill 2008). On a methodological level, social media configure themselves as environments that provide the ethnographer with an array of preset tools that actually organize the space and flow of interaction (think about Twitter's retweets and hashtags) (Marres and Gerlitz 2015), which in some ways channel and constrain the scope of action of the ethnographer and challenge the approach itself.

Given these premises, what seems to be both methodologically challenging and promising for contemporary ethnography, is not the attempt to adapt the classical qualitative techniques of analysis to online environments, but rather to understand what we can learn from online environments in terms of new methods and new languages, in that these are useful to re-innovate the discipline of ethnography (Pink et al. 2016; Ruppert et al. 2013).

In the following section, I reflect upon the possibility of combining Digital Methods with ethnography. Specifically, I show how Digital Methods could inspire the ethnographer through the new methodological strategies and conceptual frameworks that are useful for mapping the social structures and cultural processes being deployed in social media environments.

Digital Methods

In his article *Internet Research: The Question of Method*, Richard Rogers affirms that the aim of the *Digital Methods Program* is to “introduce a new era in Internet-related research where we no longer need to go off-line or to digitize methods, in order to study the online” (2010: 243). According to Rogers, the contemporary Internet overcomes the classical dichotomy between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’, allowing research to go far beyond the study of *online culture*. Today, Rogers argues, the crucial issue is no longer “how much of society and culture is online, but rather how to diagnose cultural change and societal conditions using the Internet” (Rogers 2009: 8). In order to accomplish this objective, it is necessary for researchers to equip themselves with an *ad hoc* methodological array, which would be *natively digital*. That is why Rogers urges researchers not just to consider the Internet as an *object of analysis*, but rather as a *source of methods*. Given these premises, Rogers coins the ‘epistemological motto’ *follow the medium*, i.e., embracing the natural logic the Internet applies to itself in gathering, ordering and analyzing data – as with tags, links, or hashtags.

Twitter provides a useful instance to understand the above phenomenon. On the one hand, Twitter provides people with a new means of interaction and materializes new forms of sociality (Ruppert et al. 2013). On the other hand, Twitter provides researchers with the very tools for measuring those new forms of interaction and sociality (Hutchinson 2016). Let us think about the Retweet function (RT). RT is a device that mediates interactions among users, but, at the same time, it is a *native* metric for measuring, for instance, the direction (i.e. who retweets whom) and/or the intensity (how frequently A retweets B) of such interactions. Seemingly, recent publications in the

field of online content analysis suggest using native social media devices such as mentions (@), retweets (RT), or hashtags (#) as *methodological sources* for filtering and sampling texts as well as for constructing *grounded categories* through which the content of such texts can be analyzed (Lewis et al. 2013; Poell and Borra 2012).

As suggested by the examples above, Digital Methods can be distinguished from *Virtual Methods* (Hine 2005), which consist of the adaptation of methodological strategies developed offline, such as surveys and interviews, to online environments. On the other hand, Digital Methods take the nature and affordances of the digital environment seriously, as their main purpose is to follow how digital devices such as search engines and social media platforms, and functions such as Twitter's hashtags and retweets, structure the flows of communication and interaction on the Internet.

Digital Methods, as developed by Richard Rogers, are inspired by Bruno Latour and Michel Callon's Actor-Network Theory (Callon 1986; Latour 1999). Actor-Network Theory is a sociological stream that investigates the complex relationship between humans and machines in their everyday life as well as their interaction in the co-construction of social reality. According to Actor-Network Theory, social formations are "patterned networks of heterogeneous materials" (Law 1992: 381), which "include human and nonhuman actors (i.e., individuals, institutions, and resources)" (Thomas et al. 2013: 1011). Actor-Network Theory urges researchers to understand social formations as being the results of actors' activity rather than as the *a priori* starting point for analysis. For this purpose, Latour (2005) coins the motto *follow the natives*, which means following the *practices* through which social actors construct the social order as well as the 'emic' *categories* they use for framing and justifying it (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Goodenough 2009). This *follow the natives* motto also entails considering non-human actors (e.g. digital devices) as *quasi-subjects*, i.e., hybrids endowed with a specific agency and morals that cooperate with human actors in the construction of social formations (Latour 1988).

Thus, combining the principles of *follow the medium* and *follow the natives*, it is possible to derive two useful strategies for the ethnographer coping with social media environments, i.e., a) observing and describing the processes of online communication structuring enacted by social media affordances and digital devices (*follow the medium*); and b) observing and understanding the online social formations emerging from different practices of the use of digital devices enacted by users as well as the meanings they attribute to activities deploying such social formations (*follow the natives*). Furthermore, within this framework, both digital devices (non-human actors) and users (human actors) can be considered as social co-researchers, since they provide the ethnographer with the *natively digital methods* for analyzing the digital forms of life (e.g. RTs) and with the *emic categories* for interpreting them.

Let us consider for example Twitter's hashtags. Hashtags are digital devices for categorizing and collating tweets "related to a specific topic" (Bruns and Burgess 2011: 2) (e.g., #wine, #punk, #climatechange, and so on). Hashtags are generally used by users for creating threads of conversation around a common theme or interest (Zappavigna 2011). Therefore, by following hashtags, a researcher can define specific online social formations. Nevertheless, in order to properly frame and understand the meaning of the activities developing in such formations, it is not sufficient to follow and analyze hashtags *per se*, rather one has to investigate and understand the practical uses actors make of those hashtags. In a recent article on the Gamergate¹ (GG) controversy, Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016) point out that the hashtag #gamergate is used in opposite ways by two different 'social factions' pursuing different goals. On the one hand, pro-GG users use the hashtag #gamergate for denouncing the lack of ethics in gaming journalism, while, on the other hand, anti-GG users use #gamergate for denouncing the sexual harassments and abuses brought about by pro-GGs against feminist activists and female gamers by means of the very hashtag #gamergate. Seemingly, in a recent empirical research on trending topic hashtags, Bruns et al. (2016) illustrate how different social practices enacted by Twitter users around specific hashtags

¹ See Massanari (2015) and Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016) for more information about the Gamergate case.

are able to put into existence different social spaces. For instance, certain hashtags such as #breaking, #tsunami or #charliehebdos are conducive to the generation of what Bruns et al. call *acute events*. Acute events are characterized by attracting a high percentage of RTs and tweets containing URLs. In relation to acute events, Bruns et al. account for the tendency of Twitter's users to "engage in gatewatching activities both within and beyond *Twitter* [by] posting new information, linked through embedded URLs, into the hashtag (or keyword) conversation, and [retweeting] the material already available within *Twitter* itself" (2016: 27). Conversely, hashtags such as #eurovision, #masterchef or #electionday generate what the researchers call *media events*, which attract a very low percentage of RTs and URLs. Here Bruns et al. note that audiences "tend to use *Twitter* as a second-screen channel, enabling them to comment on and respond to what they see on television" (2016: 29).

In this case, we can see how technical functions such as #s, RTs and URLs function both as devices for materializing social formations and methodological sources for measuring them; simultaneously, we acknowledge how users' practices help researchers to better frame and interpret the nature of such social formations as well as the meaning of activities developing within them.

Re-assembling social formations

The methodological strategies and empirical cases inspired by the principles of *follow the medium* and *follow the natives* introduced in the previous section make clear that, within a fluid and dynamic context such as that of social media, the definition of an online social formation cannot be considered an *a priori* task, but rather an *a posteriori* one (Postill 2016). Thus, we can say the main task for the ethnographer moving across social media environments is not so much to identify an online community to immerse in or follow, but to map the practice through which users and devices construct social formations around an object on the move (Büscher and Urry 2009). A useful practical strategy for doing this consists of *following the thing, the medium, and the natives*, i.e.,

following the circulation of an empirical object within a given online environment or across different online environments, and observing the specific social formations emerging around it from the interactions of digital devices and users. In order to support the ethnographer in these procedures I propose five useful (hopefully) analytical concepts: *community*, *public*, *crowd*, *self-presentation as a tool*, and *user as a device*². Obviously, I urge ethnographers to consider the aforementioned categories as *sensitizing concepts* (Blumer 1954) that have to be systematically and case-by-case tested and confronted by the empirical reality.

Communities and online communities

Generically the term ‘community’ denotes a dense network of interpersonal interactions among individuals sharing the same territory as well as a set of values (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001). However, this ideal type does not fit with the actual conditions of contemporary globalized societies, characterized by high levels of mobility, and the wide diffusion of mass communication means. Actually the means of transportation and the new communication technologies are able to “unite geographically dispersed individuals with commonality of purpose and identity” (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001: 413). In this way, the notion of community can be better understood as “a network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds” (Bender 1978: 145). Given the nature of geographically unbounded networks of social relations, communities can easily thrive on the online world – they usually relocate themselves on a particular website, such as an online forum or an IRC, which serves as a platform for social interactions and discussions (Sproull and Faraj 1995; Wellman and Gulia 1997). Quentin Jones (1997) provides an effective as well as synthetic

² It is worth stressing here that I diverge substantially from the Actor-Network Theory paradigm, specifically as far as the methodological role of ‘natives categories’ is concerned, because my main methodological benchmark is the Digital Methods paradigm. In fact, in proposing categories such as ‘public’ or ‘crowd’, I no longer account for the *emic categories* (Goodenough 2009) that users use for framing the online social formations in which they are situated, rather I am imposing *ethic categories*, i.e., prefabricated normative categories. Nevertheless, my intention here is not to: 1) develop a new style of ethnography grounded on Actor-Network Theory, rather to take inspiration from some of its principles (especially that of non-human actors agency) for supporting ethnographers crossing social media environments; 2) simply account for the sociocultural complexity pertaining to social media environments, rather than to provide ethnographers with practical tools for coping with such complexity.

definition of online community, very useful from an empirical point of view. He argues that the prerequisite for an online community is the presence of a virtual settlement that meets four conditions: a) interactivity; b) more than two communicators; c) common-public-place where members can meet and interact; and, d) sustained membership over time (Gruzd et al. 2011: 1298). As for traditional communities, an online community continues to exist until its members experience a shared sense of belonging and perceive it as a social space in which they are giving and receiving support (Schau et al. 2009).

Yet, as highlighted by Christine Hine “the model of community study turned out, however, not to be so readily applicable to the whole spectrum of online interactions” (2008: 267; see also Postill 2008; Postill and Pink 2012). Actually, the more the Internet expands, becoming *social*, the more the social interactions unfolding across it become ephemeral and disperse (Andrejevic 2013). Let us simply think about our everyday use of social media; this very often consists of updating our Facebook status or linking some content posted by a friend, retweeting interesting news, or looking in a particular forum in order to seek technical advice regarding fixing our antivirus software, or maybe posting a comment of gratitude, and then never going back (Arvidsson 2013). Although these kinds of interaction are neither exhaustive nor comprehensive of the whole Internet activity, the majority of current online interaction does not really create dense and persistent social formations such as communitarian ones. Thus, it seems urgent to identify new categories to conceptualize these new social forms. In order to do so, I will introduce, in the next sections, the notions of *crowds* and the *public*, intended as ephemeral non-communitarian social forms based on *publicity* and *affect* (Bennett et al. 2014; Papacharissi 2015). Although these terms historically belong to the sociological debate in sometimes juxtaposed nuances, conceived by early 20th Century French sociology as respectively the rational and the irrational manifestation of mass society (Le Bon, [1895] 2002; Tarde, 1901 [cited in Clark 1969]), sociological research has recently re-addressed the definition of these concepts from a more neutral stance, looking at the public and

crowds as two complementary entities, not easily distinguishable from each other – especially in their online manifestations (Olofsson, 2010).

Crowds and online crowds

Following Richard Butsch, we can generically define crowds as “a gathering of people physically together and sharing a common activity” (2008: 9). Classical sociological thought has framed crowds as an inescapable threat to social order, being the kind of social formation that is intrinsically irrational, passionate, unruly and unpredictable and usually associated with the movements of social protest that happened in European cities at the beginning of the 20th Century (Brighenti 2014). Shifting to the contemporary Internet domain, we can define an online crowd as the “affective unification and relative synchronization of a public in relation to a specific online site” (Stage 2013: 211). The online sites favor the gathering and coordination of online crowds and therefore the achievement of their common goals. In this sense, an online crowd can be framed as a social formation of individuals who “gather virtually, behave and act collectively and produce effects and phenomena which would not be possible without the Internet” (Russ 2007: 65). A more systematic definition of the online crowd is provided by Carsten Stage, who adds to the aforementioned conceptualization a crucial dimension, the *affective* one; specifically Stage points out:

“[...] A shared online event or space is of course not sufficient. To become an online crowd or ‘socio-material entity’, the public must be characterised by intense affective unification. Following this, the online crowd is used here to describe a certain type of online behaviour where the participants of a public simultaneously (1) share affective processes and (2) come together on certain online sites” (Stage 2013: 216).

Thus, affect amounts to a crucial dimension for defining offline as well as online crowds. Anyway, differently from the offline crowds where the *affective discharge* propagates from body to body (Brighenti 2010), within the online crowds the affect propagation is simulated by Internet users. Specifically, Stage identifies three main practices of affective simulation: 1) explicit expression of body reactions within the text of an online content; 2) formatting of the online content (e.g. if the discourse is distorted, ruptured, or redundant); and 3) temporary and simultaneous gathering around specific online contents in relation to certain dramatic events (Stage 2013: 219).

Those groups of users who are active on Kickstarter.com represent a clear example of an online crowd. On the one hand, onto Kickstarter converges a very disaggregated bunch of users (i.e., people that normally do not know each other and are socially disconnected), who, thanks to the website, are able to organize themselves in order to achieve the same goal: funding a project they like; once the project is successfully funded they usually disband. On the other hand, the possibility that a project is successfully funded depends on the ability of the project creator to manage the affectivity of the backers. There exist various ways for doing this; an effective strategy consists of launching an explicit naïve project, i.e., a project suitable for stimulating the imagination and triggering the emotions of the backers. There are some popular case histories of this, such as the “Salad Potato” project created by the user Zack Danger Brown (Huffington Post 2014), or “Exploding Kitten”. The latter is a silly card game mixing “*kittens and explosions and laser beams*” created by Elan Lee (The Guardian 2015), which raised \$8,782,517 (a significant part of which was collected in the first hours after the launch) and 80,556 comments, most of them consisting of messages of support or phatic expressions such as “*Amazing!*” or “*I’m so excited! Can’t wait*”³.

Another interesting example that shows the affective dynamics characterizing the crowd and its collectively distributed nature can be found if we look at teenagers on Twitter, as described by Arvidsson et al. (2015), whose favorite game is to create hashtag trading topics. The case study

³ I AM SO EXCITED!! Can't wait!!!, Emily Sheafe on January 20; amazing!, Mitchell Hammond on January 20
<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/elanlee/exploding-kittens/posts/1112377#comments>.

illustrated by the authors is that of *#HappyBirthdayDebbieFromItaly*. The hashtag *#HappyBirthdayDebbieFromItaly* was launched on 14th May 2013 by fans of the girl band LittleMix, in order to celebrate the birthday of the mother of one of the members. In order to celebrate this birthday properly, some LittleMix fans tried to push the hashtag to the list of Twitter trending topics. In order to accomplish this goal, teens used a technical strategy that is as simple as it is effective: *copy-and-paste* and Retweet. Essentially, teens started to copy-and-paste and/or Retweet many times onto their Twitter timelines the same, following message: “*#HappyBirthdayDebbieFromItaly*”. This technical strategy paired up with a discursive strategy, that consisted of: a) the pathetic invocation of the fan base (“*A RT won’t cost you anything please I beg you on my knees #HappyBirthdayDebbieFromItaly*”), and b) the depiction of a personal status of anxiety connected to the desire of finally seeing the hashtag on top of the trending topic list (“*#HappyBirthdayDebbieFromItaly IT WON’T GO UP. I CAN FEEL IT. PLEASE #RT WON’T COST YOU ANYTHING*”). Finally, once the goal has been achieved, the crowd of teens disbands – actually, the hashtag remained in the trending topic list just for one day, 14th May 2013.

In these empirical cases, the notion of online crowd reveals a good analytical concept for framing the social phenomena sketched above, since we observed a collective of users: a) converging on a certain digital device; b) coordinating through the same digital device in order to achieve a common goal; and c) sharing affective intensities.

The public and online public

The historical definition of a public finds its roots in the work by the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde, who conceived the public in opposition to the crowd as a rational and reflexive collective entity. Tarde defines the *public* as “purely spiritual collectively, a dispersion of individuals who are physically separated and whose cohesion is entirely mental”, and whose bond lies in the simultaneous “awareness of sharing at a same time an idea or a wish with a great number

of men” (Tarde 1901 [cited in Clark 1969: 53]). Anyway, how can a dispersed set of individuals share at the same time the same idea and accrue an awareness of such sharing? The answer is simple: via technological devices. Actually, a public could not exist without means of communication, such as, for instance, newspapers, which are able to keep together the members of a public, catalyzing their attention and fostering a ‘virtual’ sense of belonging among them (Anderson 1983). Tarde also claims that the newspaper by itself did not create a public or public opinion. To constitute a public “readers [have] to converse with each other about what they read in newspapers; [...] through conversation, information spread from person to person, producing public opinion” (Butsch 2008: 13). The term *conversation* is not intended to be a coherent process of collective deliberation (Habermas 1989), but rather a contingent exchange of personal opinions among individuals interacting around the same media content (e.g. people reading and commenting on the headline of a newspaper in a café). These fragments of conversation generate a macro-discourse that keeps together heterogeneous and, sometimes, opposite points of view. In this sense, according to Adam Arvidsson (2013), the public can be defined as a mediated association among strangers (for instance, through a newspaper or radio station), who are united by a temporary emotional intensity, or a better focus of attention, directed towards a common object, be it an event, a political issue, or a brand (Bruns and Burgess 2011; Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012). Therefore, members of a public are not kept together by direct interaction, but by a social imaginary (or a *discourse*) created and re-elaborated by the members themselves that is spread and put into circulation within the same public (Warner 2002).

The Tardian notion of ‘public’ proves to be useful for framing different as well as common phenomena of social aggregation and interaction deploying onto social media platforms. Let us consider, for example, Twitter’s hashtags related to political issues, such as #US2012 (US Presidential Election), #primaryelection, #Obama, #Romney, and so on. Usually these kinds of hashtags attract a motley array of subjects that articulate different opinions around the same political issue they are tweeting. This phenomenon is well documented by Anders Larsson and

Hallvard Moe (2011) in their article “*Studying political microblogging: Twitter users in the 2010 Swedish election campaign*”. Through the mapping of 99,832 tweets containing the hashtag #val2010 (Swedish for #election2010), Larsson and Moe observed: a) #val2010 attracted a heterogeneous set of social actors comprised of journalists, politicians (both Liberal and Conservative) and common users; b) each actor (or group of actors) involved tended to use #val2010 for various purposes, such as criticizing a political candidate, criticizing a television debate or promoting a civic initiative; c) the actors using the hashtag #val2010 were basically disconnected from each other and did not engage in any collective debate, since only 7% of the tweets collected contained a mention (@), whereas 60.2% of the dataset was made by *singletons*, i.e., tweets without the @ or RT sign.

Another interesting example is represented by a recent article by Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016), where the authors, through an empirical analysis of the hashtag #LouisVuitton on Twitter, introduce the notion of *brand public*. According to Arvidsson and Caliandro the notion of *brand public* differs from *brand community* in three substantial ways:

“First, brand publics are social formations that are not based on interaction but on a continuous focus of interest and mediation [thanks to digital devices such as hashtags]. Second, participation in brand publics is not structured by discussion or deliberation but by individual or collective affect. Third, in brand publics, consumers do not develop a collective identity around the focal brand; rather the brand is valuable as a medium that can offer publicity to a multitude of diverse situations of identity” (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016: 727).

Thus, in both the cases presented above, we can see that #val2010 and #LouisVuitton generate specific *discursive spaces* that entail heterogeneous sets of actors – articulating a heterogeneous set of opinions and identities (or a common imaginary) – who are not kept together

by a network of direct interactions, but rather by the work of the *mediation* of some digital devices: the hashtags #val2010 and #LouisVuitton, which catalyze the attention of all the actors at stake.

Self-presentation as a tool

As already said, the concepts of public and crowd have become useful analytical concepts to cope with the extreme variety of communicational and interactional processes developing on social media, that are not always as persistent and dense as the communitarian ones (Postill 2008). Several empirical researches, both quantitative and qualitative, have shown that people generally have loose relationships on social networks (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Van Dijck 2012) and use them not so much to interact and discuss with others in a strict sense, but rather as a means to maintain and manage their own social networks – both offline and online – (Miller 2008; Parks 2011) through self-presentation strategies (Marwick and boyd 2011a). This conception of self-presentation is actually the one I would like to draw on here, since from the perspective of an ethnographer who has to cope with the complexity and fluidity of social media environments, it is fruitful to regard digital identity as a dynamic instance that emerges contingently from the various self-presentation strategies which users develop within a public space (Donath and boyd 2004).

The study of self-presentation strategies represents a staple analytical goal for any ethnographic inquiry. Nevertheless, following the Digital Methods paradigm, I think it could be useful to conceive self-presentation more as a *tool of analysis* than an *object of analysis* (Bonini et al. 2016). From this perspective, self-presentation strategies are not simply an interesting means to know something about the personality of the person who is articulating them, but rather tools to: a) measure the degree of involvement of a user within a given social formation, thus helping the ethnographer to ‘decipher’ the nature and reconstruct the structure of the social formation s/he is facing; and b) reconstruct the collectively built and shared cultural structure – since, through self-

presentation, users convey a public image of themselves that is constructed on a repertoire of symbols that they deem to be widely shared and valued (Carah and Shaul 2016).

Let us clarify this point with a few examples. Within an online community, members tend to play fixed social roles. For instance, consider the typology through which Kozinets (2010) clusters the members of consumption's online communities. Four ideal types comprise Kozinets' typology: *Devotee*, *Insider*, *Newbie*, and *Mingler*. These ideal types correspond to the kind of involvement and expertise each member transfers to the community. Therefore, each time an ethnographer observes users' self-presentations, through which they represent the role and function they play within the social group to which they belong, s/he can be confident to be in front of a community. This strategy is very useful for confronting social formations against the online platforms in which they are situated. Actually, the architecture of some websites can lead the ethnographer to think of facing a community whereas in reality the community is not actually there. This is the case of online forums, which are often deemed to be thriving places for communities (Postill 2016).

Let us consider online forums for patients. Online forums for cancer patients are usually virtual spaces that host warm communities made up of patients, parents and doctors. The existence of such a social formation can be easily deduced by observing the social roles members assume, which usually consist of two main roles: the donor and the recipient of emotional and practical support (Ogard 2005; Rodgers and Chen 2005). However, it is not the same for the online forum hosting diabetes patients. As argued by Vardanega and Vardanega (2014), these kinds of patients tend to transform the forums they frequent into '*2.0 waiting rooms*', since they use them as a place for receiving medical advice from doctors, rather than having long conversations with other patients. We can conclude that, in this case, the different social structures emerging from the same kind of online platform depend on the kind of topic convened by the users, rather than the architecture of the online platform *per se*.

Things are even more different for publics and crowds. Fashion bloggers as well as Twitter micro-celebrities (e.g. marketing gurus, TV performers, etc.) are often involved in developing

strategies of self-branding onto the social media they use (Marwick and boyd 2011b; McQuarrie et al. 2013). These strategies of self-branding aim at presenting oneself as an *authentic person*, in order to invite para-social identification (Tolson 2010). These strategies of self-presentation are not so much aimed at communicating one's personal status or engagement within a given community, but rather at enhancing personal reputation through practices of the management of one's personal social network (Gandini 2016). In turn, an invisible and indistinct audience of followers, which form a sort of online public around the celebrity, more than a classical online community of fans (Marwick 2015), makes this a personal social network. On the contrary, a user that – along with hundreds of others at the same time – converges on the Facebook page of a political activist, and, in a moment of collective enthusiasm, overfills the page with a deluge of likes, phatic comments and messages of support and cheering, is actually renouncing part of his/her individual identity in order to become part of an online crowd (Gerbaudo 2016).

Therefore, all these self-presentation strategies, rather than telling us something about the personal identities of the actors who develop them, help us to better understand the structure of the online social formation in which they are situated, as well as the cultural values circulating within that ecosystem.

The user as a device

This reflection about the user's self-presentation strategies as a tool for reconstructing collective social and cultural structures, allows us to introduce another methodological notion that could prove useful for addressing online social formations: i.e., the notion of the *user as a device*. Following the Actor-Network Theory, which considers non-human actors as *quasi-subjects* and human actors as *quasi-objects* (Latour 1988), it is possible to conceptualize the Internet user as a device (or a sensor) producing meta-data, rather than a 'standard' social actor – thus, without attempting to reconstruct his/her biography or demographic status. In this way, the user becomes an

actor who, in some sense, collaborates with the ethnographer in his/her project of research (Marres 2012). Actually, the meta-data produced by users concretely helps the researcher in better defining his/her spatial and semantic context of investigation – let us think, for example, about hashtags (#), which are basically markers through which users develop a specific thread of conversation or self-categorize their own contents.

Let us clarify this point through a concrete case study. In March 2014, my colleagues at the Centre for Digital Ethnography of the State University of Milano and I led an online investigation about *hipsterism*, on behalf of a digital marketing company. We started by downloading 1,000,000 photos marked with the hashtag #hipster from Instagram, by means of an *ad hoc* piece of software built by the software developers of the Centre. Through the analysis of a significant sample of 2,829 pictures (i.e., all the pictures collecting at least 100 ‘likes’) we discovered that the large majority of the photos that were present in our database were used to replicate the typology of picture A, not B (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

To put it differently, on Instagram we did not run into the hipster stereotype, rather into personal portraits through which users signalled the ‘hipster nature’ of some features they might have – in the case of picture A, a thick black pair of glasses. Therefore, in this case, we can maintain that Instagram is not a virtual place on which a community of hipster convenes; rather Instagram functions as a public space through which Internet users co-create a specific *social imaginary* related to the concept of *hipsterism*, and in doing so helping the research to better define this phenomenon. Actually, by continuing to follow this collective ‘game of hipsterization of objects’ we realized that users tended to signal Tumblr as a social network for hipsters. It is not by chance that, moving to Tumblr, we actually discovered different users and contents more akin to the ideal type of hipster (Arsel and Thompson 2011).

Along with all those cases in which users *explicitly* produce meta-data, for instance by creating a hashtag, there are also cases in which users produce them *implicitly*, although with the same purposes: i.e., to circumscribe a discursive space and self-categorize their own contents. The following example is taken from an online forum of discussion for moms (Cossetta and Caliandro 2013).

“I saw people dying to buy Alviero Martini (a brand that, among the other things, I adore, but I can’t afford the luxury of purchasing). Well, if one is rich then she can buy it, but I don’t understand those who have to buy branded clothes for their kids at all costs, even if they can’t pay the bills at the end of the month! Well, me too, I bought my baby Alviero Martini shoes, but in my case it was a present from my grandparents and there were discounts⁴” [25/05/2010, forum.alfemminile.com].

As can easily be observed, this mother is not merely communicating the fact that she bought a pair of branded shoes, but also (and above all) what she is doing is trying to justify her act of consumption through a complex ritual of self-narration. This mother is not only conveying a message to her audience, but also the ‘right way’ to frame and interpret the message itself. Specifically, this mother is stating she loves a luxury brand, such as Alviero Martini, but in a way that differentiates her from the mass of consumers – it seems as if she would have marked her online message with an ‘invisible hashtag’, something like #IamNotaBrandJunkie or similar. For the ethnographer, it is crucial to allow these ‘invisible hashtags’ to materialize, since they do not give as much information about a specific mother *per se*, rather they permit the reconstruction of a *maternal imaginary* that is socially shared by the actors participating in the context of study. Actually, through her public self-presentation, the aforementioned mother conveys an image of herself as a reflexive and rational consumer, which is not casual, but instead constructed on a discursive *topos* that is widely shared and valued within online forums devoted to maternity: that of

⁴ Post translated from Italian by the author.

the mother as a reflexive consumer (Song et al. 2012). Thus, also in this case the self-presentation strategy reveals a useful, not *per se*, tool for reconstructing a shared cultural system.

Still, the social practice to justify one's own demeanor in public is neither something new, nor something that pertains exclusively to the online domain. Nevertheless, the specific practice of self-categorizing one's own messages is strictly embedded in, and shaped by, the everyday interactions between users and digital devices. Specifically, this practice derives from a form of hyper-reflexivity driven by the affordances of social media, which continuously make users aware of acting in front of an *invisible audience* (boyd 2011). Furthermore, these practices of self-categorization (and evaluation) of user-generated contents are also driven by the 'behavior' of social media, which not only self-organizes its own communicative fluxes, but also constantly 'invites' users to do the same through a complex array of likes, tags, hashtags, favorites, etc. (Gerlitz and Lury 2014; Gershon 2011).

Conclusions

In this article, I have attempted to present some *research strategies* and *analytical concepts* useful for the ethnographer who has to cope (during his/her fieldwork) with the complexity of social media environments. As argued, social media platforms present themselves as very complex, fluid and fragmented spaces. Within these spaces, it is not always possible to consider the 'classical' online community as the privileged field site for the ethnographer, into which s/he delves. Taking inspiration from the paradigms of Digital Methods, Actor-Network Theory, and Multi-Sited Ethnography, I have suggested that the main task for the ethnographer moving across social media environments is no longer that of identifying an online community to immerse into or follow but to map the practices through which users and devices construct social formations around an object on the move. Thus, a challenging research question for an ethnographer exploring contemporary online spaces could not be so much "*Which kind of online community should I study?*", rather "*Is the*

online social formation I am faced with actually a community?” Specifically, I have stressed that a practical strategy for answering a question of this kind could be that of *following the thing, the medium, and the natives*, i.e., following the circulation of an empirical object (such as a topic of discussion, a political issue, or brand) within a given online environment or across different online environments, and observing the specific social formations emerging around it from the interactions of digital devices and users. Only after this operation of mapping is concluded, the ethnographer can identify the specific social formation with which s/he is confronted, defining it as a community or something else, such as a public or a crowd. In other words, the definition of the online social formation the ethnographer has to deal with is not necessarily the starting point of his/her inquiry, rather the point of arrival.

In order to support the ethnographer in his/her research on social media environments, I have proposed five specific analytical concepts: *community*, *public*, *crowd*, *self-presentation as a tool*, and *user as a device*. I do not claim these categories to be exhaustive or able to cover the whole range of possible online social formations thriving on the Internet. More simply, they can be conceived as analytical tools that help the ethnographer to go beyond merely accounting for the spatial complexity and fluidity of social media environments, thus proving to be useful tools for coping with such complexity and fluidity.

In building the aforementioned analytical concepts, I have tried to propose some suitable methodological strategies for an ethnography *for* the Internet, rather than establishing a new style of ethnography *of* the Internet (Hine 2015). Actually, using these concepts for mapping online environments is not the same as conducting a proper ethnography – since no direct interaction with participants is expected. Nevertheless, their application entails an ethnographic attitude and utility, since it supports the ethnographer in delving into social formations, systems of meaning and strategies of self-presentation – all key and basic topics for ethnographic inquiries.

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FIGURES

FIGURE 1. REGULAR VS STEREOTYPICAL HIPSTERS



Picture A (excerpt taken from Instagram)



Picture B (excerpt taken from Google Image)